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Symbolism and Art

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Symbolism and Art

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Artist Statement

I am interested in communication through symbolism. The symbols that I incorporate in my mixed media work are simplified into essential lines and shapes. I use the Kabbalah's Tree of Life diagram as a structure to hold my own personal symbols. These symbols are my interpretation of the phases of life.

I also use prehistoric symbols such as the spiral, circle, square, triangle, and cross as a focus to emphasize the beauty of these very basic lines and shapes which we see all around our world. To emphasize the beauty of symbols I use repetition, color, and texture.

Life is overwhelming and chaotic at times. Having simplicity in my visual surroundings creates a sense of tranquility and contentment. I aim to convey these feelings to the viewer while having them interpret what the symbols mean to them.

Symbolism and Art

Introduction

My love for creating art developed when I was a teenager. I used paint, charcoal, and clay to visually express my emotions. This was a difficult phase in my life when my feelings ranged between sadness, happiness, pain, and confusion. Art was there for me throughout my path to adulthood. I found that creating art became my comfort and eventually my passion.

After being an art instructor for only two years I found myself not fully satisfied with teaching art. I yearned to create my own artwork again. I wanted to be surrounded with creative energy and to be involved in critiques. I started by taking a sculpture and clay class with a co-worker. Jenna McCracken and Margaret Boozer were my instructors. They were very inspiring and frequently shared their artwork with us which was very motivating. It was moving not only to see their work but also their love and passion for it. My mind was rich with ideas of what I wanted to create. It felt good to get my hands on clay and begin molding my ideas. It was then that I applied and was accepted to the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) Off-Campus Graduate Art Program at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Aesthetics

During my coursework I focused on visual communication through symbols. I was interested in and researched Kabbalah and the philosophy's concept of the Tree of Life and translated it into my artwork. Kabbalah is a discipline and school of thought

concerned with the mystical aspects of Judaism. The Tree of Life, referred to as *Etz Chayam* in Hebrew, is a concept that alludes to the connections of all life on our planet. In my work I often communicate the different phases of my life using personal symbols and the Tree of Life diagram as a template.

In addition to my personal symbolism, I use prehistoric symbols such as the spiral, circle, square, triangle, and cross in my work. I want to reveal the beauty of these basic symbols by emphasizing various formal elements, such as line, shape, and texture. I focus on principles of art and design such as rhythm, emphasis, and unity. Lines and shapes can mean very different things to the viewer depending on how they are presented and executed. I want to present these symbols in a way that is open to interpretation.

Life is difficult and chaotic at times. It is calming to me to have simplicity in my life and surroundings. The influential German-American Architect Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe (1886-1969) is known to have used the motto “less is more” (Hochman, 264). His concept of reduction fits into my own philosophy of minimizing and simplifying detail.

Imagery-Tree of Life

In my own philosophy, all life is born a dot. This metaphorical dot expands into a line that is linear and beautiful. The line grows and will go through life’s phases. The line may curve, twist, and turn. It may become a shape which then turns into a foundation for more growth. Pillars of knowledge, strength, love, and beauty can rise from the foundation. I use The Tree of Life diagram (Appendix, 1) to incase the structure or path that the beginning “dot” took. For my work, I studied the meaning of each stage of the

diagram. I then created my own tree and translated the stages into symbols.

In *Tree 1* (Appendix, 2) I echoed the structure of the diagram. I used the diagram as the structural layout of my work but used visual symbols instead of words to interpret the stages and meaning of the diagram.

Contrary to how a tree grows, from the ground up, the Tree of Life is described as starting at the top and descending in its growth process. At the peak of the Tree of Life is the “Crown” (Appendix, 1). In this location in *Tree 1* (Appendix, 3) I inserted an alchemical symbol. This particular seventeenth-century symbol represents a quest for physical transformation and spiritual illumination. This symbol seemed relevant to begin the tree with because it represents searching for change and inner spirituality. Moving down to the right in the Tree of Life diagram, I depicted “Mercy” (Appendix, 4) as abstract arms in a praying stance because praying is what I think of when the word mercy is mentioned. “Judgment” (Appendix, 5) is to the left and I represented this stage as a cross restricted by a circle. I chose the cross because it is a religious symbol. I enclosed it with a circle to represent judgmental attitudes limiting or not allowing the full development of the belief or religion. The longest arm from the “Crown” is reaching to the heart of the Tree of Life which is an area designated as “Beauty” (Appendix, 6). I placed the spiral here because it represents the consciousness of nature, beginning from the core or center and expanding outwardly; it reflects my idea that life begins as a dot. The second to last stage is “Foundation” (Appendix, 7) which I represented as a circle. The circle is an ancient and universal symbol of unity, wholeness, and infinity.

Tree 1 (Appendix, 2) was constructed on two pieces of black plywood. The two pieces are intended to be presented vertically, each piece of wood measures 36”x24”.

Using the Tree of Life diagram as a template, I applied small 3"x3" wooden squares for each stage in the template. I painted the squares either chrome green or scarlet red. I thought the green gave it a natural feeling and the red added interest and contrast. I manipulated bronze and copper wire to create the individual symbols and glued them on top of the 3"x3" squares. I connected the symbols by placing 2"x2" mirrors in between the symbols. This created a sense of movement from one stage to the next, added interest, and unified the piece. Within the piece is a vertical piece of wood that has texture like bark. This added an interesting texture and reinforces the tree-like structure of the piece.

Tree 1 is my personal interpretation of the Tree of Life. I replaced abstract concepts with visual representations of particular symbols that have meaning to me. However, I intended the piece to be open to other interpretations.

Nature

After creating *Tree I*, I continued to work with mixed media and focused on nature. When interpreting natural elements I was drawn to specifically prehistoric symbols, focusing on the spiral, circle, square, triangle, and cross. I chose to work with prehistoric symbols because I found their visual simplicity interesting. I used them as the subject of my work. All of the symbols have historically weighted meanings. I interpreted them not only in regard to their historical meaning but also what they personally meant to me. For example, historically, the spiral is known as a symbol for growth. I interpreted it as a symbol for maternal beauty which I emphasize in *Anatomy of Life* (Appendix, 8) by placing a bold spiral inside the stomach of a female figure. This

72"x48" mixed media piece includes acrylic paint, sand, and conte crayon. I wanted to work large because it has a stronger impact on the viewer. I chose to add sand to create texture in the piece. I worked with the conte crayon to achieve a sketch-like quality to add variation.

After working with mixed media on canvas I started working with a new material, concrete. I created several tiles with concrete and incorporated different materials within them, such as sea glass, wire, and stones. To make the tiles I began by pouring concrete into plastic molds. The molds I used were usually shallow square shapes about 5"x5" in size. After the concrete was poured I had to work quickly to add materials to the tile before the concrete began to set. I began to model these materials into *Prehistoric Symbols I* (Appendix, 9). This work consists of four 5"x5" tiles that are presented in an overall vertical orientation. In this piece I concentrated on the simplicity of the line and shape of these symbols. The top tile depicts a circle made of stones and short pieces of wire. The circle represents eternity and resilience. Moving downwards, the next piece is the cross made of wire and sea glass representing religion and beliefs. Next, is the spiral which was created by stamping. Here, I used a spiral shaped wire as the stamp and added a stone in the center, this represents growth. Last is the triangle made of wire and sea glass. To me, the triangle displayed a solid ground or foundation on which to grow because the apex points to the upper tiles.

As a counterpoint to images that are embedded with symbolism, I also constructed pieces that were more focused on essential design elements. Naturally occurring shapes and lines found in nature influenced my work in the preliminary stages of developing ideas. Sometimes, the simple lines found in a leaf or the texture found on

the bark of a tree can be broken down into basic lines and shapes. In *Circle of Nature* (Appendix, 10) I placed rocks, small branches, and burlap into a circular mold of concrete. I did this to express my love of these simple natural materials and objects. I physically use these objects in my pieces as symbols of nature.

Another concrete piece I created was *Line* (Appendix, 11). This piece was made of three 5"x5" concrete tiles with bronze and copper wire embedded into them. The tiles were intended to be presented vertically. I took wire, varying in length, and pushed the wire into the concrete. The upper and lower tiles have wire pieces that are barbed, the wire pieces in the middle tiles are longer and are curled. I wanted to create an aesthetically and visually pleasing work made of straight and curved lines that were in the form of a relief. *Line* is a piece emphasizing one of the simplest elements of art. It is art made of what most all art starts with, a line.

Next, I created a series called *Prehistoric Symbols II* (Appendix, 12). These are oil pastel drawings on white paper. Each drawing depicts a varying combination of symbols in sequential form. By arranging the symbols differently in each piece, I believe that they can be read or interpreted uniquely. Each symbol is surrounded by a black border, works are then mounted on white matte board. I had frames in mind before executing the symbols. The black frames created another compositional device by complementing the black border around each individual symbol.

In my next series I decided to explore organic shapes. I started working on two similar pieces at the same time, *Energy I* and *Energy II* (Appendix 13, 14). I used a small range of earth-toned colored paper for the shapes. Then, I added a graphic sense of energy and contrast by using a bold black charcoal line on top of and around the

shapes. These pieces were different from most of my other work because I used the traditional drawing materials, paper, and charcoal. I was in my comfort zone working on these pieces and can foresee many possibilities for more drawings focusing on my response to nature.

I used symbols in my work because they are elements that can have multiple meanings. People often interpret fundamental lines and shapes in different ways. Traditional symbols have a determined terminology and a long history; however they can be read differently when taken out of context or mixed with other symbols. Therefore, I feel free to develop my own personal symbols as well as use traditional ones.

Conclusion

The Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Program has helped me explore many different aspects of art that I never would have attempted on my own. I was influenced by my peers and professors who allowed me to create art in a unique way. My classmates inspired me to take my ideas to the next level and challenge myself. I found peace and tranquility in the studio and I have discovered a new, more confident artist inside me. I feel my own students will benefit through what I have learned in this program. I have learned patience, understanding, importance of positive feedback, and the value of objective criticism.

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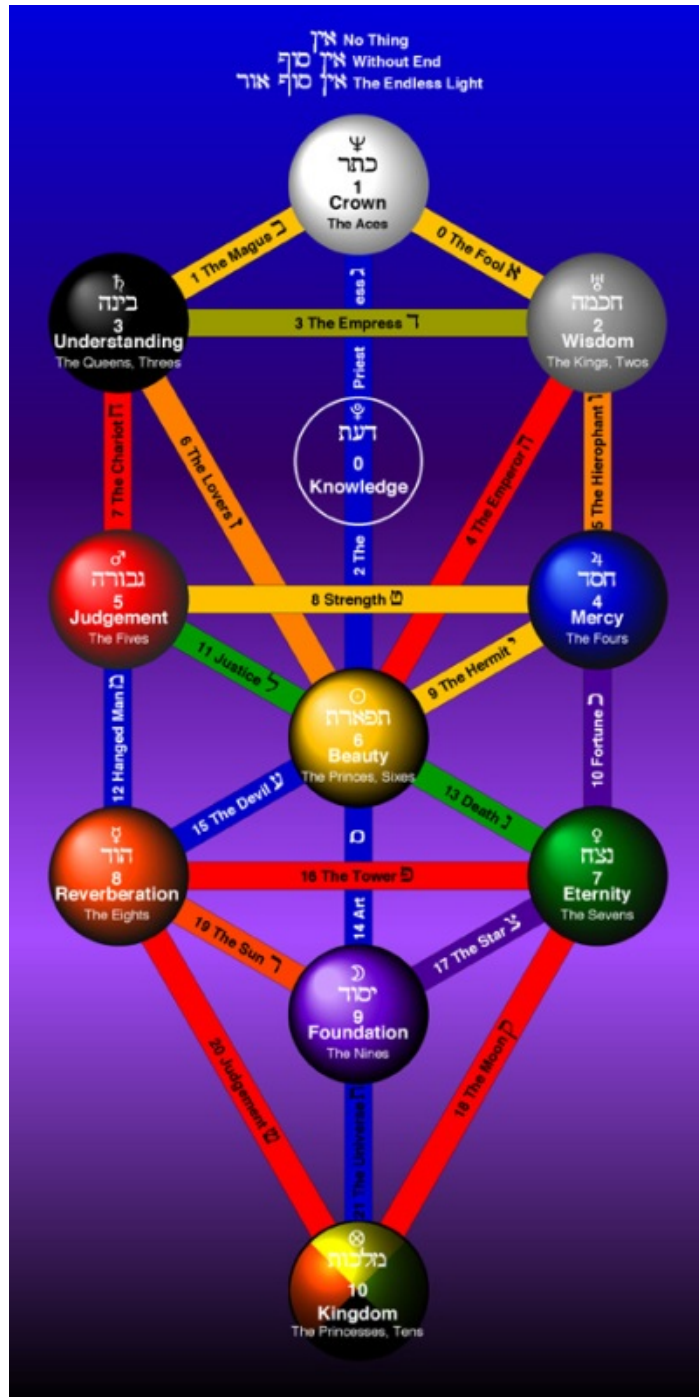


Figure 1. Tree of Life Diagram from David Godwin in *The Truth About Cabala*. St.Paul, Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications, 1994, p. 11.

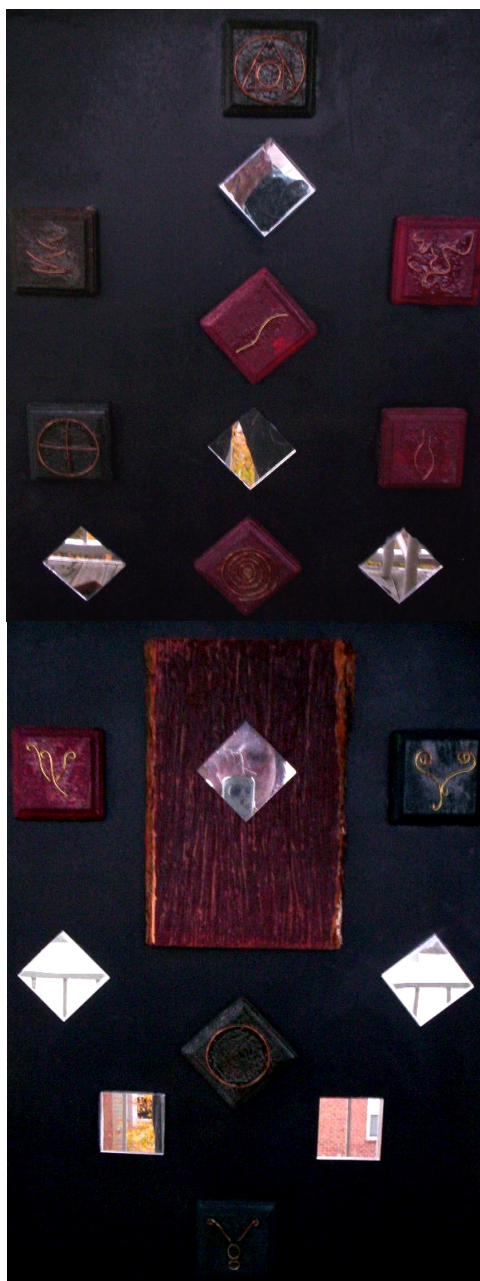


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72"x24", 2009.



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Figure 5. Detail of *Tree I: Judgment Symbol*, Mixed Media, 3"x3", 2009.

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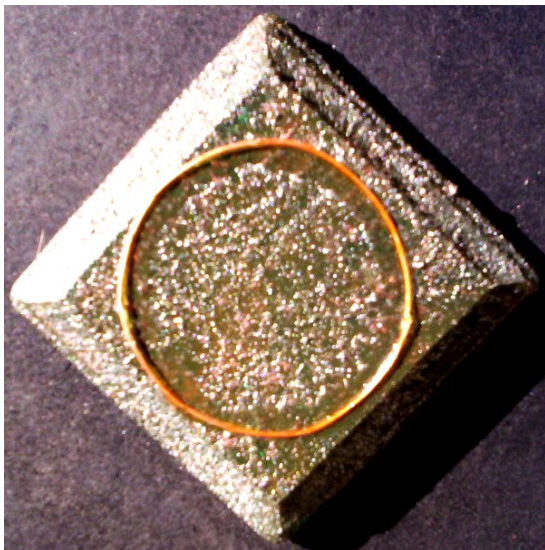


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